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FUTURE WAR PAPER

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLEFIELD AND KILL WITH A BORROWED KNIFE: AL QAIDA'S CATALYST STRATEGY

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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| 14. ABSTRACT In the winter of 2003 in Eastern Afghanistan, while conducting combat operations against Al Qaida, I had the opportunity to visit the ruins of one of Osama Bin Laden's training camps. This particular camp, I was told by a US Army Intelligence Officer (S-2), was the spot that Al Qaida's top leader's planned the 9/11 attacks against America. As I stood in the large crater that once contained Bin Laden's meeting room, I observed that there was no electricity, wells, trafficable roads, or any other modern convenience within a forty-five mile radius. I tried to imagine the scene of Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri, Mohammad Atef, and Khalid Sheik Mohammad and others, planning the 9/11 attacks, and how that conversation might have played out. I thought to myself, what was the initial argument presented for attacking the US and by whom? What objective did they hope to achieve and what was their strategic endstate? | | | | | |
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Executive Summary

In the winter of 2003 in Eastern Afghanistan, while conducting combat operations against Al Qaida, I had the opportunity to visit the ruins of one of Osama Bin Laden's training camps. This particular camp, I was told by a US Army Intelligence Officer (S-2), was the spot that Al Qaida's top leader's planned the 9/11 attacks against America. As I stood in the large crater that once contained Bin Laden's meeting room, I observed that there was no electricity, wells, trafficable roads, or any other modern convenience within a forty-five mile radius. I tried to imagine the scene of Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri, Mohammad Atef, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad and others, planning the 9/11 attacks, and how that conversation might have played out. I thought to myself, what was the initial argument presented for attacking the US and by whom? What objective did they hope to achieve and what was their strategic endstate?

After dwelling on those questions, I asked them to the S-2 Officer. His answer was similar to those I often hear from US political and military leaders. He said, "Al Qaida attacked us in order to humiliate the US and to push us out of the Middle East, and away from any other Muslim lands. He stated that Al Qaida chose the very symbols of American greatness: "her economy (World Trade Towers), her Military, (the US Pentagon) and her Government, (The US Capital)." I pondered on his answer for several minutes and then asked, "If they were smart enough to plan an operation that effectively penetrated a military superpower's multi-layered defensive shield, with no conventional weapons, and still achieved two out of three of their objectives, why weren't they smart enough to understand that after killing thousands of Americans, the US military would not pursue them relentlessly?" He paused and said, "I don't know".

Since then, I have accepted the premise that Al Qaida "did" know that the US military would deploy to Afghanistan if they were successful on 9/11. I argue that 9/11 was part of a grand strategy that is playing out now on the battlefields of Afghanistan and to al Qaida's surprise, Iraq. If the reader agrees to this premise, then he/she must ask, "why did Al Qaida want the US military to invade Afghanistan? The answer to that question I believe is the secret to winning the war. An understanding of al Qaida's strategy, what I term "Al Qaida's Catalyst Strategy", is essential to that end.

The Nature of War

Clausewitz stated, "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking." The US is not in a "new" kind of war that some authors suggest, but is experiencing a "new kind of strategy", a catalyst strategy that has global effects on US national security interest. If the enemy's strategy is misunderstood, the US will not be able to design a counter strategy that is effective and continue to experience strategic setbacks for the foreseeable future.

Dr. Melon Vego, Professor of Operations at the US Navy War College stated, "If you don't know your enemy and the nature of war, you are going to lose." US strategists must understand both the nature of the war that we are currently fighting, as well as the enemy and his strategy. By understanding the enemy's strategy, we can determine his objectives. By understanding his objectives (end), we can determine the ways and means he envisions using to attain it. By understanding his ways and means, along with his objective, we can identify his center of gravity. After determining his center of gravity, we can attack it and ultimately destroy it.

This essay will take the reader through the emergence of Al Qaida's Catalyst Strategy, in order to identify al Qaida's objectives and center of gravity, offering perspectives on how to defeat him. Ultimately, it is our political and military leaders that must be capable of identifying and maintain the military strategic aim throughout any war. I often ask myself, "is, al Qaida's understanding of us better than our understanding of them? It is an interesting thought to ponder. If a misunderstanding of al Qaida and the problems he presents in Afghanistan causes a failure in the attainment of our strategic endstate, the US political and military leaders must analyze, assess and reframe the problem in order to identify new operational goals. This paper attempts to accomplish that end.

When confronted with a strategic problem, strategists must first make an assessment of the situation confronting them. Without a basic understanding of the situation, decision-making and action are likely to be seriously flawed. The development of strategy demands a certain discipline to study and understand the dynamics of the situation and think through the implications of potential actions. While it is often possible to recover from a tactical error or defeat, the consequences of a serious misstep at the strategic level can be catastrophic.

MCDP 1-1 Strategy, 12 Nov 1997

Our ultimate objective of these painful strikes against the head of the serpent was to prompt it to come out of its hole. This would make it easier for us to deal consecutive blows to undermine it and tear it apart. It would foster our credibility in front of our nation and the beleaguered people of the world. A person will react randomly when he receives painful strikes on his head from an undisclosed enemy. Such strikes will force the person to carry out random acts and provoke him to make serious and sometimes fatal mistakes. This was what actually happened. The first reaction was the invasion of Afghanistan and the second was the invasion of Iraq.

Sayf Adel, Al Qaida Military Commander, and former Col in the Egyptian Special Forces, 15 July 2005

Understanding The Problem and the Enemy

After the attacks on September 11th, 2001, US strategists did not frame the problem confronting them properly and failed to answer the question: “why did Al Qaida attack the U.S.?”¹ Al Qaida was viewed as merely a regional terrorist organization that the US would quickly punish instead of an intelligent, capable enemy with a comprehensive strategy that if “put into motion” could possibly achieve its “political goal” of rebuilding the Islamic Caliphate.² Explanations of why al Qaida attacked the US were not given the necessary in-depth analysis or debate among US military and political leaders. Al Qaida’s political goal continues to bleed the US, both in dollars and lives in Afghanistan, Iraq, North Africa and Southeast Asia. Until US policy-makers and strategists fully understand al Qaida’s strategic design, we cannot defeat

¹ George Friedman, *America’s Secret War: Inside the Hidden Worldwide Struggle Between America and its Enemies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 58.

² Ibid., 58

them. This essay will explain al Qaida's "catalyst strategy" in order to determine future enemy operations and offer planning recommendations on how to defeat al Qaida.

Al Qaida's Ends and Means

The value of the objective, in turn, is a major indicator of the resources-the means-that both sides will likely commit and sacrifices they will make to achieve it. An understanding of both ends and means is required in order to develop an effective military strategy.

MCDP-1 Strategy, 20 June 1997

The most important thing that was missed by the terrorism [strategic] experts, who were studying Al Qaeda's [sic] methods [ways] instead of its ends, is that it had a much more sophisticated understanding of the Islamic world than did the left wing-wing [Islamic fundamentalist] movements in the 1970s and 1980s.

George Friedman, America's Secret War, Oct, 2005

In order to design a strategy to defeat al Qaida, the US must understand the enemy's *ends*: their objective, end state, and criteria for success; their *ways*: center of gravity, decisive points, and operational design and their *means*: capabilities, resources, and force composition. Al Qaida attacked the United States in order to draw the U.S. military into a prolonged unconventional war in Afghanistan where it could be defeated. Al Qaida's strategic objective, *ends*, is to achieve a new Islamic Caliphate that regains the lost territory of the great Islamic dynasties of the past.³ Their *means* to achieve their strategic goal was to attack the U.S. ("the far enemy")*, thereby prompting the US to invade Afghanistan. Al Qaida's *ways* in Afghanistan is to inspire, recruit, and receive Islamic fighters from around the Muslim world, and to radicalize, train, and employ them against the US military. After soundly defeating the US military, Al Qaida intends to send these fighters back to their countries of origin as a *catalyst* towards their

³ Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 77.

strategic objective, building the Islamic Caliphate.⁴ Al Qaida's objective may sound delusional at first glance, but after examining Osama Bin-Laden's 1998 legal pronouncement (Fatwa) below,⁵ which also served as al Qaeda's declaration of war on the US, it is difficult to dispute that some objectives listed within it have not only occurred, but have in fact exceeded their original endstate:

To kill Americans and their allies – civilians and military- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim...

...We-with God's help-call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. [sic] We also call on Muslim *ulema*, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to their money wherever and whenever they find it and to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devils (America's) supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

Osama Bin Laden's Fatwa, Feb 23, 1998

Although mostly underground, Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) still maintains operational influence in the region, launching attacks against Iraq's leadership, while the Taliban and Taliban splinter groups, with the help of Al Qaeda, are gaining a significant power base within Afghanistan and Pakistan. Throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, al Qaida continues to erode traditional tribal and state leadership structures, aiming to unify the Muslim people under a radicalized pan-Islamic Caliphate. At home, US military leaders' continued requests for troop surges in Afghanistan is deteriorating America's will to endure the "Long

⁴ Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words A Translation of the Writings of Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri* (Old Tappan: TLG Publications, 2006), 255.

⁵ Marvin E. Gettleman, Stuart Schaar, *The Middle East and Islamic World Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 2003), 325.

* **Far Enemy** is a term that was used by Jihadis to refer to the US and Western allies as opposed to "**Near Enemy**", used to describe local Muslim regimes that oppose Islamic Fundamentalism. , Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

War”, while NATO and coalition partners question the validity of future military commitments to Afghanistan, wondering if the volatile country can be saved.

Al Qaida’s Strategic Design

“[A designer is] an emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist”.

Buckminster Fuller 1895-1983

The 9/11 attacks on America demonstrated strategic design and operational art at the highest level. Without a military or professional war college, without missiles, warplanes, satellites or warships, a small group of al Qaeda planners designed an attack unparalleled in its asymmetry in ancient or modern warfare. The al Qaida strategists, living in austere conditions, designed an operational plan that struck at the very heart of the US, boldly focusing on a massive physical and psychological strike with three key objectives. America’s government, economy, and military were all to be attacked within minutes of each other. But their true strategic objective is still debated among US military and political leaders.⁶

The designer of the Victory Plan of WWII, General Albert Wedemeyer, wrote: “A journey can only be charted with a destination in mind, and a strategy can be plotted only with goals in mind.”⁷ It is logical then to assume that al Qaida strategists would not have devoted the level of time and the detailed planning needed to achieve one of the greatest disproportional attacks in history without having a clear strategic goal, an objective that was nested within their operational design.

Sean Costigan and David Gold in “Terronomics”, a book that articulated economic warfare as a key component to global terrorism, stated that “deploying the complex

⁶ CRS Report for Congress, “Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology” by Christopher M. Blanchard. (July 9, 2007), Congressional Research Service, CRS-5.

⁷ General Albert Coady Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer on War and Peace* (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press 1987), 232.

organizational structure necessary to carry out [the 9/11 plans] [could have taken] several years.”⁸ It is, therefore a justified presumption that al Qaeda’s strategists, in their 9/11 long-term planning and war-gaming, understood that by killing thousands of Americans, they would ignite a fierce response that would certainly involve American military forces being deployed to Afghanistan in large numbers. If this presumption is correct, then US planners must ask themselves: why would al Qaeda want the US Military to invade Afghanistan in large numbers? The answer is found in the emergence of modern and medieval Jihad strategy and the men who wrote on the subject.

The Beginning of the Catalyst Strategy

One of the most prominent Jihadist and theorist, Sayyid Qutb, wrote in *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq* “*Milestones*”,⁹ that in order to restore Islam on earth and free all Muslims from their ignorance of *al-Jahiliyah* “divine guidance”, a “vanguard” must be formed, which should model itself after the original companions of Muhammad, the Salafists.¹⁰ Qutb’s theory manifested itself in the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and several other Islamic fundamentalists groups throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Qutb hoped that, through his writings, he would inspire a sizeable number of Muslim youth to overthrow the Egyptian government. In that regard, Qutb argued that the formation of the Muslim “vanguard”, fighting through persuasion (preaching and adherence to Sharia*) and later, when the time was right, through force of arms, could abolish the existing political power structures, which, he

⁸ Sean S. Costigan and David Gold, *Terronomics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 197.

⁹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Div., Random House, 2006), 29.

¹⁰ Giles Kepel, Jihad: *The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006), 220.

argued, rested upon a “complex yet interrelated ideological, racial, class, social and economic support” structure.¹¹ Without this structure, Qutb believed, the Egyptian government could not survive.

Qutb, and a significant number of his followers, believed that the abolishment of apostate power structures would ultimately occur within each Muslim state, if the right “conditions” existed and the people could be enlisted in the effort. Referring to the Egyptian government as the “internal enemy,” the “near enemy”, and Western governments as the “external enemy,” or the “far enemy,”¹² Qutb focused on discovering the catalyst to achieve his goal of Islamic governance harkening back to the Islamic Middle Ages.

Qutb studied earlier Islamic scholarship, theology, and social science to aid him in the study, refinement, and formation of his modern Jihad strategy. Ibn Taymiyya, an earlier Islamic theologian (1263-1328), is widely credited with influencing Qutb’s ideas on Jihad.¹³ However, it is the lesser-known fourteenth century scholar, Ibn Khaldun, who has been overlooked by US strategists and historians as an important influence on Qutb and other Jihad theorists.

Ibn Khaldun was a theologian, lawyer, military strategist, and social scientist and is considered by many Western scholars to be among the founders of the social sciences. In his book *Muqaddimah*, completed in 1377, Khaldun wrote theories on philosophy, history, sociology, demography, historiography, and culture. He also wrote extensively on economics

¹¹ Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd 2006), 33.

* **Sharia:** Forming the basis of moral and social wellbeing. Derived from the Quran and Hadith, both collectively known as Sharia, the “Islamic Way”., Michael D. Coogan, *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

¹² Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2005) 5

¹³ Hunt Janin, *The Pursuit of Learning in the Islamic World, 610-2003* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc 2005) 158

and Islamic theology, but it was his theories on “social cohesion”, “group solidarity”, (asabiyah)¹⁴ and “tribalism” that resonated with Qutb and still resonates with al Qaida strategists today.

Khaldun argued that, “social cohesion arises spontaneously in tribes and other small kinship groups and that it can be intensified and enlarged by religious ideology.”¹⁵ Khaldun examined how this “cohesion carries within it psychological, sociological, economic, and political seeds that can bring the kinship group to power, while also becoming its downfall.”¹⁶ Arguably, it was Qutb’s examination of early Islamic social science scholarship, such as Khaldun’s, that helped shape his belief that, if planted properly, the social seeds of cohesion, solidarity, and tribalism would take root in the people of Egypt and, if given the right inspiration or catalyst, could prompt the people to rise up and overthrow the apostate rulers (*kifr*). He argued that the Western ideologies such as nationalism and socialism would eventually overtake *sharia* and place Muslims under Western secular laws.

Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, a follower of the Muslim Brotherhood and later the second in command of al Qaida, had witnessed firsthand as a young man in Egypt the power of enlisting Muslim youth to overthrow the near enemy, i.e., the Egyptian leaders such as President Anwar Sadat. He wrote: “*Qutb’s call for faith in Allah’s Oneness, for submission to His sole authority and sovereignty [Hakimiyya], was the spark that enflamed the Islamic revolution against Islam’s enemies throughout the world.*”¹⁷ After Zawahiri’s imprisonment and torture for charges

¹⁴ Ibn Khaldun, Franz Rosenthal, N.J. Dawood, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1981) xi

¹⁵ Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, *Early Muslims and their Contributions to Science: Ninth to Fourteenth Century* (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 171.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Giles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Washington DC. Library of Congress 2004) 79

associated with the Sadat assassination, he became disillusioned with the failure in regard to the “near enemy,” and aimed his sights on serving in the Jihad in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion in 1979.

It was in Afghanistan after the war that Zawahiri concluded that creating an Islamic Emirate in Egypt could only be achieved by destroying the “far enemy” (Western powers) first.¹⁸ Zawahiri’s involvement and interaction with other Jihadists in the Soviet-Afghan War helped him build upon Qutb and other Jihadists’ theories for achieving an Islamic caliphate* explain in note. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan became the unintentional catalyst that drew thousands of Jihadists, support personnel, and Salafi ideologists together in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Peshawar, Pakistan, Zawahiri routinely engaged in discussions on jihad strategies to defeat the Soviet Union while also serving as a medical doctor to wounded Mujahedeen. Zawahiri and other Jihadist leaders focused, as did Qutb, on the enlistment of Muslims throughout the Islamic world to support and defend Afghanistan.

The Mujahedeen* fighting in Afghanistan were inspired by their success in guerrilla warfare against the powerful Red Army and began to openly discuss strategies that might bring about the overthrow of the governments within their own countries after they had defeated the Soviets. Zawahiri stated in his book, *Knights Under The Prophet’s Banner*, that the Afghan Soviet War... Gave young Muslim Mujahedeen-Arabs, Pakistanis, Turks, and Muslims from Central and East Asia-a great opportunity to get acquainted with each other on the land of Afghan jihad through their comradeship-at-arms against the enemies of Islam.” “Mujahideen

¹⁸ Reza Aslan, *How to win a Cosmic War God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*: (New York: Random House 2009), 117.

* **Caliphate**: The Muslim state established by the successors (‘caliphs’) of Muhammad (d. 632). Samuel Edward Finer, *The History of Government From the Earliest Times: The Intermediate Ages: (c.1900)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 665.

[sic] young men and jihadist movements came to know each other closely, exchanged expertise, and learned to understand their brothers [sic] problems.¹⁹

The Jihad strategists who helped defeat the Soviet Union were forever influenced by their service in Afghanistan and departed the country believing that, if they could defeat a world superpower by enlisting fighters from around the Muslim world, they could also achieve the same outcome within their own countries, overthrowing the apostate regimes in Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Somalia, and others. In order to accomplish that end, however, they would have to find the right balance of “social cohesion”, “group solidarity”, and “tribalism” that Khaldun had written about six hundred years before.

It was arguably Zawahiri who understood the importance of exploiting group solidarity, which Khaldun had written about and that existed within the various Pashtun tribes within Afghanistan. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Zawahiri witnessed how untrained and uneducated Mujahedeen could rise up, unify, and fight against a superior conventional force, all the while being guided by Salafists towards the true path of Islam. Afghanistan, Zawahiri reasoned, could become the “base” upon which to build the vanguard necessary to fight the global Jihad.

Zawahiri’s experience in Egypt had taught him that geography, social structures and external support were required to build the vanguard, lest it be molested in its infancy as had occurred in Egypt. He therefore strove to build a base in Sudan, but lacked the support and geographical conditions necessary to do so. His push to establish a base in Sudan may have

¹⁹ Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri, as translated by Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri* (US: TLG Publications 2006), 38.

* **Mujahedeen:** A Muslim resistance movement that was fighting against the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan. Dale W. Jacobs, Editor in Chief, *World Book Focus on Terrorism* (Chicago: World Book, Inc., 2003), 104.

been prompted by his eagerness to be physically closer to his birthplace, hoping to use Sudan to launch Mujahedeen into Egypt, ultimately overthrowing the Mubarak regime.²⁰ After his expulsion (from Sudan back to Afghanistan) in the mid 1990's, Zawahiri and several other al Qaida leaders focused their sights on destroying the last remaining superpower, the US. All that remained was to design the appropriate strategy to achieve the desired objective.

When examining Zawahiri's writings on Jihad strategy, it is interesting to note his references to the medical sciences. "Scientific knowledge is neither Western or Eastern, but the property of mankind and it rotates among them in time and place."²¹ "Jihad, according to the doctor, required a "scientific, confrontational, rational" ",²² meaning that Zawahiri built his strategy on Jihad from supporting scientific evidence, reason, or logic. As an example, when talking about the plan to assassinate a US President, Zawahiri wrote a "daring plan" must be "based on careful reconnaissance and "scientific" analysis of the realistic information".²³

Zawahiri's father was a professor of pharmacology and his mother was the daughter of an Egyptian ambassador. He was therefore likely exposed to an interesting mix of medical and political science discussions throughout his upbringing. His immediate and external family consisted of several who were involved in medical professions. Ayman obtained a degree in surgery, graduating *Cum-Laude* from Cairo University, and served three years as a surgeon in the

²⁰ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Div., Random House 2006), 242.

* **Salafism:** An ideology that promotes a return to Islam, only through the foundations of the Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah (a "manner of life" including that which the Prophet Muhammad did, that which he enjoined, and that which was not forbidden by him when done in his presence). Jarret Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

²¹ Intel Center, *Words of Ayman al-Zawahiri*, (Alexandria: Tempest Publishing, LCC 2008), 495.

²² Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004), 96.

²³ Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, as translated by Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: Translation and Analysis of the Writings of Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri* (US: TLG Publications 2006), 84.

Egyptian Army.²⁴ Thus, from a young age, Zawahiri was surrounded by science, fundamentalist Islamic ideology, and anti-government sentiment manifested in such organizations as the Muslim Brotherhood.

The influence of science, Islamic and political activism most certainly would have shaped the way Zawahiri viewed the world and also the way he thought about strategy. It is not surprising then that he built upon the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, Qutb, and the orator/political scientist, Vladimir Lenin, in exploiting all three men's social theories to design a strategy for al Qaida as detailed below:

Zawahiri's strategic thinking and understanding of asymmetrical warfare and revolutionary violence is heavily indebted to vanguardism [sic], a Leninist theory of revolution, which posits that a small, revolutionary elite uses violence to rouse the people to fight against the government. The inevitable government crackdown will further fuel popular discontent and increase support for the vanguard... [This method] was our means of raising the awareness of the *Ummah* (Islamic nation) and awakening it... He adds that by attacking Americans and Jews, their allies in the Middle East will be forced to defend them, which will further demonstrate their subservience to foreign powers".

The exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword
Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, March 2008

Zawahiri offered a new strategy in order to accomplish the goal of recreating the Caliphate and although Khalid Sheik Mohammed is generally credited with the operational planning for 9/11, it was Zawahiri who was the strategic level planner of al Qaida's first theater level attacks: the Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi bombings on August 7, 1998. Zawahiri, most likely aided by the former Egyptian Col Adel, masterfully planned, coordinated, and executed attacks on two US embassies "within 5 minutes of each other in cities approximately 450 miles apart"²⁵ Given the success of the simultaneous operations,²⁶ it is entirely feasible that

²⁴ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Div., Random House 2006) 50

²⁵ "Bombs Explode at 2 U.S. Embassies in Africa; Scores Dead," *Washington Post*, 8 Aug 1998, sec A, p. 1.

“while Osama bin-Laden may have given his blessings to the mission, subsidized it and provided the engineering analysis for it, its strategic diabolic planning must have been conceived by the brilliant and methodical Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri.”²⁷ Zawahiri understood that, in order to build a Caliphate, al Qaida had to remove the ruling regimes in the Muslim world and, in order to overthrow the ruling regimes in each Muslim country, al Qaida would first have to defeat the Western nations that supported them, especially the US and Great Britain.

In order to defeat the Western nations, al Qaida required a strategy that could, first, defeat US military power. This would require the help of the Muslim people around the globe and over a long period of time. Zawahiri and others within al Qaida’s senior leadership realized that the US had the ability to deploy large numbers of well-trained forces, and had the weaponry and finances for a protracted conflict. However, considering past experiences in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, American financial and political will had its limits.²⁸ Thus, al Qaida had to design a strategy that emphasized wearing down US political will over a prolonged period of time and using the Muslim vanguard that would be created by the mere presence of US troops in Muslim lands. “on 22 January 2007, Zawahiri welcomed President Bush’s move to send some 20,000 additional troops to Iraq, even asking him to send the entire US Army, so that it might vie with the militants in virtue as much as vice”²⁹ Al Qaida had solidified their strategic goals prior to 1998 when Bin Laden issued his Fatwa declaring war against the US. All that remained was the catalyst necessary to draw US forces into Afghanistan.

²⁶ William J. Parker, Heidi J. Bridges, *Jihadist Strategic Communication: As Practiced by Usama Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri*: (Bloomington: Author House 2008) 18

²⁷ Alfred G. Gerteiny, *The Terrorist Conjunction: The United States, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and al-Qa’ida* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc 2007), 50, 51.

²⁸ Intel Center, *Words of Ayman Zawahiri, Vol 1* (Alexandria: Tempest Publishing, LCC 2008) 346

²⁹ Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press 2008), 41.

Attack where he is unprepared, appear where unexpected... When the enemy is too strong to attack directly, then attack something he holds dear. Know that in all things he cannot be superior. Somewhere there is a gap in the armor, a weakness that can be attacked instead... To confront a powerful opponent in a head to head contest of strength is the most costly and least favorable method of war. Instead, while the enemy is preoccupied with other objectives you attack something of value that he has left behind unguarded. When he is forced to break of his current campaign in order to rescue what he has lost, you can lead his disheartened forces into a trap.

When you do not have the means to attack your enemy directly, then attack using the strength of another. Trick an ally into attacking him, bribe an official to turn traitor, or use the enemy's own strength against him. Attack using the strength of another (in a situation where using one's own strength is not favorable). Trick an ally into attacking him, bribe an official to turn traitor, or use the enemy's own strength against him.

Sun Zi, The Art of War Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE)

We planned for this stage and prepared ourselves for it before the start of the US offensive. The real war has started now. These cities will be catastrophic for those who are now making them bases for attacking us.

Al-Majallah Newspaper, Dec 16-22, 2001

Catalyst Warfare

In science, catalysis is the process of which the rate of a chemical reaction is either increased or decreased by means of a chemical substance known as a catalyst. Unlike other elements that participate in the chemical reaction, a catalyst is not consumed by the reaction itself. The catalyst may participate in multiple chemical transformations. Catalysts that speed the reaction are called “positive catalysts.” Catalysts that slow down the reaction are called “negative catalysts” or “inhibitors.”³⁰ Substances that enhance the activity of catalysts are called “promoters” and substances that deactivate catalysts are called “catalytic poisons.”

The American political scientist, and authority on ancient Greek politics and literature, Richard Ned Lebow, wrote: “All the underlining structural systemic, and unit-culture factors favoring a certain kind of action and outcome might well be present in a given situation, but

³⁰ Donald Macy Liddell, *Handbook of Chemical Engineering* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company 1922), 749.

* **Anarchic:** Lacking order or control.

* **Multi-Polar:** Characterized by more than two centers of power or interest.

absent a specific catalyst of action the outcome may still not occur”.³¹ An anarchic* interstate structure, a heavily militarized multi-polar* state system, and a militaristic and aggressive unit culture all are important, but in themselves may not be enough to complete a causal analysis explaining major actions.³²

During the Soviet-Afghan War, Zawahiri had served alongside the tribes of Afghanistan and Pakistan, most notably the Pashtuns, from 1979 to 1989, from whom he learned first hand about the Pashtun tribal system and therefore understood the role of social cohesion and group solidarity. He, more than any other al Qaida leader, had a better understanding of the Pashtuns “anarchic interstate structure,” which was contained within a “multi polar state system” (tribal) that was extremely “aggressive and militaristic” in its “unit culture.”³³ Notably, Zawahiri moved his wife and daughters to Afghanistan and integrated his family into the Pashtun unit culture, adhering to its rules and regulations and earning the respect and trust of the tribal elders. Given his depth of understanding of the Pashtuns [Mujahedeen]³⁴ and his careful study of the US Military and their operations in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, Zawahiri was positioned to devise a workable strategy that, in its design would contain catalytic promoters, the US and the Pashtuns. The catalyst for global Muslim action would be the 9/11 attacks, which would provoke the US to send its armed forces into Afghanistan among the Pashtun tribes, changing both the Pashtuns and the US in the process. Once US forces were inside Pashtun lands, their very presence would cause the Pashtun tribes to rally together to expel the invader. In doing so, the “positive catalyst”, one that favors al Qaida, would be started.

³¹ Carl Conetta, “Dislocating Alcyoneus: How to Combat al-Qaeda and the New Terrorism” briefing memo # 23, Project on Defense Alternatives, June 25, 2002.

³² Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*: (London: University of California Press 2006) 262

³³ Ibid

³⁴

Carl Conetta, in his article “Dislocating Alcyoneus,” writes, “Al Qaeda's terrorist violence is neither "nihilistic", as some have asserted, nor is it narrowly instrumental, instead, it is catalytic -- meaning that it aims to provoke a wider conflict and mobilize a larger constituency. As Osama bin Laden freely admits: "We are seeking to incite the Islamic nation to rise up to liberate its land and to conduct jihad for the sake of God."³⁵ Thus having gained a better understanding the evolution of jihad from Ibn Khaldun’s writings and Sayeed Qutb, Zawahiri advanced a catalyst strategy that was able to exploit the uneducated masses. However, there are cracks within the catalyst strategy that can be exploited by US strategists against al Qaida.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the US avoided the challenge of moving large numbers of conventional forces into Afghanistan by adopting a strategy in which small contingents of Special Forces and Central Intelligence Agency personnel deployed to southern and eastern Afghanistan. [See map](#) The US military relied heavily on these small teams early in the war to identify, disrupt, and destroy al Qaida and Taliban forces. What some US military observers missed, however, was the way in which al Qaida and the Taliban responded to the smaller US force.

Al Qaida had all along planned for the US to link-up with the Northern Alliance.³⁶ This is evident in al Qaida’s planned assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud on 9 September 2001, which preceded the US attack.³⁷ Al Qaida planned the death of Massoud in order to demoralize the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance and its leadership, aiming to cause fractures that would “preclude the unification of Afghan opposition to the Taliban” and reduce their effectiveness in

³⁵ Carl Conetta, Dislocating Alcyoneus, Project on Defense Alternatives Briefing Memo # 23, (25 June, 2002)

³⁶ “Bin Laden’s Right-Hand Man, Al-Zawahiri, Interviewed on Fighting in Afghanistan” *Al-Majallah Newspaper* (in Arabic), 16, Dec, 2001, p. 12-13

³⁷ David C. Rapoport, *Terrorism: Critical Concepts In Political Science* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 65.

assisting US forces in the region.³⁸ Al Qaida leaders also realized that the US military's ignorance of the lack of social cohesion between the Tajiks and the Pashtuns would isolate hundreds of Pashtun tribes which had not yet joined the Taliban, driving them into al Qaida's camp and against the US – Tajik force simply out of tribal alliance with other Pashtuns. The US strategists' lack of cultural understanding on this problem continues to degrade the effectiveness of US military operations in the region today. As Dr. David Rapoport points out in *"Terrorism: Critical Concepts In Political Science"*:

The terrorism of September 11 was above all a provocation-albeit a provocation of gigantic proportions. Its purpose was to provoke a similarly gigantic repression of the Afghan civilian population and to build universal solidarity among Muslims in reaction to the victimization and suffering of their Afghan brothers. In this second act of the terrorists' drama, the roles are reversed: the attacker becomes passive, and he himself is attacked, while the original victim of terrorism becomes the prime mover. Should the United States and its allies succeed in identifying their target with precision and thereby limiting the ravages of war among civilian population, which the terrorists would undoubtedly use as a human shield, then there would be no third act. On the other hand, had the repression gotten out of control and caused huge numbers of civilian casualties-what military spokesmen bloodlessly describe as "collateral damage"-the trap would have closed and the third act, that of solidarity, would have begun. The terrorist actor would then have attempted to become the catalyst of a mass movement.

In recent battles in Afghanistan, (March 2010) US forces have unintentionally contributed to the repression or perceived repression of Afghan civilian populations, with the unfortunate deaths of 27 Afghan civilians in Uruzgan and Dai Kondi Provinces and another 28 civilians reported killed in "Operation Moshtarak"* in Marjah. Both cases demonstrate the difficulty in countering the catalyst strategy by using conventional approaches. The unintended outcome of large conventional operations are: more restrictive rules of engagement for the counter insurgent (COIN), the inability to get the positive COIN message to the people, and the unfortunate loss of hard fought terrain and the people living within it.

³⁸ Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hurbis: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*: (Dulles: Brassey's Inc) 34.

* **Moshtarak**: is a Dari word for working together-"joint". Marjah a predominant Pashtun area does not use the word Moshtarak in their dialectic. Tajiks, the historical enemies of the Pashtuns, use Moshtarak in their vocabulary.

Al Qaida's *end*, the achievement of a new Islamic Caliphate, is slowly being achieved, one village at a time, through al Qaida's *means*, the "Far Enemy" (US) occupying Afghan villages where the probability of Afghan deaths increase with the increase of conventional US forces and their lack of cultural understanding. The perception of US forces fighting the "Afghan people", create the *ways*, (inspired Afghans - mostly Pashtuns) who are recruited, radicalized, trained, and employed against the US military, thereby creating Dr. Zawahiri's "Vanguard".

Although David Kilcullen, rightly addresses al Qaida's ways in his book "*The Accidental Guerrilla*", **note** critical thinkers who are focused on al Qaida's "end", could argue Pashtun tribesmen (the means), in this case, are not accidental at all. Instead, they are "the means", planned by a very smart adversary to achieve his "end". "When you do not have the means to attack your enemy directly, then attack using the strength of another", or "when you don't have an army, build one out of the Pashtuns you know and want to recruit". Al Qaida understands "badal" (revenge killings) and its role in Pashtun culture and society and they are using with amazing skill towards their end.

In 2001, al Qaida had planed to fight a large conventional army as mentioned above. However, because they did not anticipate fighting the small unconventional force they received, their catalyst strategy was ineffective, contributing to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of uncommitted Pashtun tribes along with the disorganized al Qaida leadership. It became extremely difficult for al Qaida and the Taliban to coordinate their efforts against a force that was, small in number, mounted on mules but still able to drop laser-guided munitions from unseen aircraft. Al Qaida designed the right plan, but was presented with the wrong enemy. The last experience that the leadership of al Qaida (formerly Mujahedeen) had in fighting a

conventional force was against the Soviet Army, which acted predictably and became wedded to the primitive road network and built up areas, attacking slowly and methodically from two main routes in the northern part of the country. See map

US Strategic Blunders

Because of a two false planning assumptions: the size and method of the U.S. invasion entering Afghanistan, and how the US would be received by the Pashtun population, al Qaida and its Taliban fighters were not prepared, and were easily pushed into Pakistan within three months, where they were forced to hastily regroup. Unfortunately, the US strategists did not realize al Qaida's end, means and ways, and quickly shifted its priority to Iraq, ceding al Qaida two enormous strategic gains, the ability to regroup and rebuild their splintered command and control and more devastating, geographically expanding al Qaida's reach, through catalyst, one country away from their geographical objectives, Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem note. US strategist had inadvertently given al Qaida the necessary conditions needed for another catalyst. Simply stated, al Qaida is not finished in Iraq and will reemerge when the time is right. From a geo-strategic standpoint, the US Military had moved the battlefield closer to al Qaida's original objectives as outlined in the first Fatwa,

Fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in To all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. This is in accordance with the words of Almighty Allah, and fight the pagans all together as they fight you all together, Allah."³⁹

³⁹ Richard Bernstein, *Out of the Blue: The Story of September 11, 2001, From Jihad to ground Zero* (New York: Henry Holt Books 2002) 90.

Fortunately for the US al Qaida was not prepared to confront US forces in Iraq and most likely had to rapidly plan for it. Al Qaida's command and control, pushed into the mountains of Pakistan, had been severely degraded and proved unable to move the right leaders into the right places effectively. However, with American attention centered on Iraq, al Qaida refocused their operations to focus on social cohesion, group solidarity, and tribalism, this time in an arena that they knew much better and was logistically easier to support. The US is now witnessing the gradual movement of al Qaida towards this most important geographic center, Saudi Arabia, evidenced by recent al Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula operations in Yemen.⁴⁰

Counter Catalyst Strategies:

In examining al Qaida's catalyst strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, one can identify key variables in their catalyst equation. Al Qaida requires the right social elements **note** that will react with each other and change both of their original states. But Al Qaida cannot afford a reaction that would change its own structure in the process. Al Qaida therefore requires the right laboratory (region/country) to affect the catalysis, one that has the geographic and ethnographic essentials such as bases and sanctuaries in remote mountains or jungles or heavily forested areas with large masses of specific cultures (mostly tribal) outside of the reach of government influence. Al Qaida needs a large conventional enemy force that is reliant upon known lines of communications and large logistical depots. Al Qaida's strategy also requires that an "apostate" government exists, one that goes against traditional Islamic social norms and structures and especially tribal law.

⁴⁰ "Al-Qaeda group in Yemen gaining prominence", *Washington Post*, 28 Dec 2009. Sec A, p. 2.

Beyond the above, Al Qaida requires a country that has a history of civil war and significant ethnic divisions, where communal conflict is still fresh in the memories of the various ethnic groups and tribes. Al Qaida also requires some type of shared history with the people that they are trying to enlist in their local vanguard. Finally, al Qaida requires a thriving black market economy to funnel money, weapons, drugs, and fighters into the region that they are trying to influence.

The countries/regions that are most suitable for al Qaida's catalyst strategy to work are:

Defeating the Catalyst Strategy

In order to defeat al Qaida's catalyst strategy, the US must focus on finding catalytic poisons. As noted earlier, catalyst poisons are those substances that reduce the effectiveness of a catalyst in a chemical reaction. The poisons form on the surface of the catalyst and reduce its effectiveness to increase or decrease the reaction.⁴¹ Catalyst poisons in relation to al Qaida are many: their indiscriminate killing of other Muslims, Mullahs or Muslim scholars who denounce al Qaida and their methods etc., Sufi Muslims, which historically make up the preponderance of Pashtun tribes within Afghanistan and Pakistan, are opposed to the Wahabist doctrine of al Qaida. Note on Sufi Muslim social group catalytic poisons

Other catalyst poisons can be found in Pashtun culture, i.e., their reliance on traditional tribal jurisprudence rather than sharia law. Historically, Pashtuns have regarded tribal leaders as higher than Taliban imposed Islamic rule. Thus, one approach would be to rebuild and strengthen tribal governance, instead of forcing tribesmen to accept an unfamiliar western model.

⁴¹ Daniel Douglas Eley, *Advances in Catalysis & related Subjects, Volume 27*: (London: Academic Press, Inc. 1978) 315

Such approaches as noted above can be applied properly if US strategists focus more on the social and cultural aspects of Qaida's catalyst strategy.

Similar to elements in the periodic table **note**, Muslims throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Asia make up a vast array of heterogeneous social groups with their own religious attitude and historical narratives. US strategists tend to collect all of these groups into one category, which is not only impossible, but also impractical. **Nor would a scientist want to due to not being able to achieve the reaction desired** Each group will almost always react differently to a catalyst depending on their "properties", such as their social structure, history, identity, language, etc. And yet, because their members comprise practically every Muslim group in the world, al Qaida has an enormous advantage over the US. They understand the intricacies of these cultural dynamics and how to apply the right catalyst in order to get the desired reaction. However, US strategists informed by cultural anthropologists, ethnographers, and local allies, could design a strategy that makes use of the laboratory of "Culture as a System". Culture as a system examines the changes in each one of the dimensions in the culture as a system loop. Each dimension consists of socio-cultural elements that can be analyzed for their action and reaction. After a planner understands the action and reaction among the elements he can plan appropriately.

MCDP 1-2 states "tactical success" does not always translate to the "synergy" of effort and the "theater-wide" perspective. Similarly, certain reactions between elements, although productive, may cause destabilizing affects on other elements once altered from their original form. Military planners find themselves integrated in civil-military campaigns that may not be synergized with the complex "political and physical terrain." Therefore, they must first understand the enemy's end, means and ways. Then they must identify, those critical elements

that if combined, would cause a catalyst that would be counter productive to their strategy. Because, al Qaida uses the social science of war to achieve its end, US military planners, must also understand it and be able to plan for future catalysts while applying catalytic poisons to current catalytic poisons. US strategists must be acutely aware of catalyst warfare at the operational and strategic levels of war, anticipating those elements that if combined could significantly diminish the “theater-wide” perspective and strategic end. Additionally, the US must begin to examine those countries that have the key elements already present that make them vulnerable to a catalytic event: unstable governments on the verge of overthrow, illiteracy, unemployment, political oppression, religious environments, etc.* **note giving examples**

* In the book *Radical Islam in Central Asia*: Vitalii Viacheslavovich Naumkin gives many causal factors of why

Conclusion

Al Qaida today continues to grow in such countries, expanding outward, confident of victory against the far enemy (US) in Afghanistan. US strategists must begin to understand and appreciate how catalysis warfare is manifested and develop a comprehensive understanding of how different cultures will react to the catalyst presented by al Qaida.

In the end, US strategists have failed to appreciate the extent to which the 9/11 attacks were part of a well-designed strategy to draw in the US, defeat it, and purge its presence from the Islamic world, as well as rendering it incapable of projecting military power thus eliminating its ability to support those regimes, which have historically been friendly to the US. Al Qaida is a capable organization that has crafted a catalysis strategy that, if not countered, will alter the character of the Muslim world in the near future. In order to counter this strategy, the US must appreciate the social science of war and how it relates to Muslim societies and cultures. In this

fashion, the US can begin to design strategies that employ catalyst poisons to degrade, defeat or prevent the catalyst from achieving its desired end.